

Fifty Years of Public Trust in American Institutions: Trends, Causes, and Societal Impacts (1976–2026)

Introduction

Over the past half-century, the United States has witnessed profound shifts in public trust toward its most significant institutions. From the federal government and the military to the police, religious organizations, education, business, and the media, Americans’ confidence in these pillars of society has fluctuated—often declining—amid political, economic, and cultural upheavals. This report provides a comprehensive, data-driven analysis of how public trust in eight key American institutions has changed from the 1970s to the present. Drawing on a wide array of reputable sources—including Gallup, Pew Research Center, the General Social Survey (GSS), and academic meta-analyses—this report not only documents the trajectory of trust in each institution but also explores the historical events and societal forces that have shaped these trends. Finally, it examines the consequences of declining institutional trust for American democracy, civic life, and social cohesion.

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FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

Long-Term Trends in Trust

Public trust in the federal government has experienced a dramatic and sustained decline over the past 50 years. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, trust was exceptionally high: **73% of Americans in 1958 and 77% in 1964** said they trusted the government in Washington to do what is right “just about always” or “most of the time”. However, by the late 1970s, this figure had plummeted to around 30%, and it has rarely exceeded that level since.

Table 1: Public Trust in the Federal Government, 1958–2025

Year	% Trust Government "Always/Most of the Time"
1958	73%
1964	77%
1976	~32%
1980	~25%
1990	~30%
2001	~54% (post-9/11)
2007–2025	17–30% (never above 30%)
2025	17% (at historic low)

Sources: Pew Research Center, Gallup, National Election Studies

The **sharpest declines** occurred during the late 1960s and 1970s, coinciding with the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal. Trust briefly rebounded in the 1980s and late 1990s, but these upticks were short-lived. The aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks produced a temporary “rally-around-the-flag” effect, with trust peaking at over 50%, but this too faded rapidly amid the Iraq War and the 2008 financial crisis. Since 2007, trust has remained below 30%, reaching just 17% in 2025—one of the lowest points in seven decades.

Partisan and Demographic Polarization

Trust in the federal government is now **deeply polarized along party lines**. Members of the party controlling the White House consistently report higher trust, while opposition party members’ trust has collapsed. For example, in 2025, **26% of Republicans** and only **9% of Democrats** said they trusted the government “always” or “most of the time”. This pattern has intensified over time: in the 1970s, even opposition party members reported moderate trust (e.g., 64% trusted the government on international issues), but by the 2020s, that figure had dropped to just 20%.

Demographic differences in trust are less pronounced than partisan ones, but notable. In 2025, **White (16%), Black (14%), Hispanic (20%), and Asian (22%)** adults reported similarly low trust. Younger adults (18–34) have become slightly more trusting in recent years, but overall, trust remains low across all age, education, and income groups.

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Key Historical Events and Their Impact

- **Vietnam War (1965–1973):** Eroded public confidence as the war dragged on and government credibility was questioned.
- **Watergate Scandal (1972–1974):** Triggered a precipitous drop in trust, especially among Nixon supporters, and had lasting effects on attitudes toward government and the media.
- **Economic Stagflation (1970s):** High inflation and unemployment further undermined faith in government competence.
- **Post-9/11 (2001):** Temporary surge in trust, followed by rapid decline amid prolonged wars and political polarization.
- **2008 Financial Crisis:** Renewed skepticism about government effectiveness and fairness.
- **COVID-19 Pandemic (2020–2022):** Exposed partisan divides over public health policy and government response, contributing to further erosion of trust.
- **January 6, 2021, Capitol Attack:** Deepened distrust, especially among those questioning the legitimacy of elections and government institutions.

Analysis

The **decline in trust in the federal government** is both a symptom and a driver of broader societal changes. It reflects dissatisfaction with government performance, perceived corruption and waste, and increasing partisan polarization. The collapse of cross-party trust—where opposition party members now report almost no confidence—has made it difficult for government to command legitimacy and respond effectively to crises. This erosion of trust has profound implications for democratic governance, policy implementation, and social cohesion.

The MILITARY

Public Confidence Over 50 Years

Unlike most other institutions, **public confidence in the U.S. military has increased since the 1970s**, though it has shown signs of decline in recent years. In 1975, **58%** of Americans expressed “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the military. This figure rose steadily, peaking at **85% in 1991** after the Gulf War and remaining above 70% for much of the 2000s.

Table 2: Confidence in the U.S. Military, 1975–2025

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Year	% "Great Deal/Quite a Lot" Confidence
1975	58%
1981	50% (post-Vietnam low)
1991	85% (Gulf War peak)
2003	82%
2018	74%
2023	81%
2024	61%
2025	62%

Sources: Gallup, Statista, Pew, Stars and Stripes

The **post-Vietnam period** saw low confidence, but successful military operations (e.g., Gulf War, early Afghanistan campaign) led to surges in trust. The aftermath of 9/11 produced a “rally-around-the-flag” effect, with confidence reaching historic highs. However, protracted conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, high casualties, and political controversies have contributed to a gradual decline since the late 2000s. By 2024–2025, confidence had dropped to around 61–62%—still high relative to other institutions, but the lowest in two decades.

Partisan and Demographic Patterns

Confidence in the military is **consistently higher among Republicans** than Democrats, with a gap of about 13 percentage points in recent years. Men, older adults, and those with military experience also report higher trust. Racial divides are present but less pronounced than for the police or government.

Key Events Influencing Trust

- **Vietnam War (1960s–1975):** Eroded confidence, reaching a nadir in the late 1970s.
- **Gulf War (1991):** Quick victory restored public faith.
- **9/11 and Afghanistan/Iraq Wars:** Initial surge in trust, followed by gradual decline as wars dragged on.
- **Recent Political Controversies:** Debates over “woke” policies, diversity initiatives, and military leadership have polarized opinions and contributed to recent declines.

Analysis

The military remains one of the **most trusted American institutions**, consistently ranking just below small business. Its reputation for competence, professionalism, and national service has insulated it from the broader crisis of institutional trust. However, recent declines suggest that even the military is not immune to political polarization and societal disillusionment.

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POLICE

Changes in Public Trust Since the 1970s

Public trust in the police has **declined modestly over the past five decades**, with significant fluctuations in response to high-profile events. In the early 1990s, **64%** of Americans expressed “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the police—the highest recorded level. By 2020, this had fallen to 48%, and in 2023, it reached a record low of 43%. However, **2024 saw a notable rebound to 51%**, the largest year-over-year increase among major institutions.

Table 3: Confidence in the Police, 1993–2025

Year	% "Great Deal/Quite a Lot" Confidence
1993	64%
2004	64%
2020	48%
2023	43%
2024	51%
2025	45% (Honesty/Ethics measure)

Sources: Gallup, Law Enforcement Today, Worldmetrics.org

Demographic and Partisan Divides

Trust in the police is **highly polarized by race, age, income, and political affiliation**:

- **Race:** In 2020, 55% of White adults, 18% of Black adults, and 29% of Hispanic adults expressed high trust. Black Americans are about 25% less confident in the police than White Americans, reflecting ongoing negative experiences and concerns about bias.
- **Age:** Older adults (65+) are nearly twice as likely as young adults (18–29) to trust the police “a great deal” (41% vs. 22%).
- **Income:** Lower-income individuals are more likely to report low trust.
- **Political Affiliation:** Republicans are 38% more likely than Democrats to trust the police; confidence among Democrats has declined sharply in recent years.
- **Urban/Rural:** Rural residents are more trusting (48%) than urban residents (26%).

Impact of Major Events

- **Rodney King and LA Riots (1992):** Sparked national debate on police brutality.
- **Ferguson and Black Lives Matter (2014–2016):** Led to renewed scrutiny and declining trust, especially among minorities.
- **George Floyd’s Murder (2020):** Triggered a sharp drop in confidence, with record lows among Black Americans and young people.
- **Police Reforms and Community Initiatives:** Some communities with reforms (e.g., body cameras, de-escalation training) have seen modest increases in trust.

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Analysis

While the police remain among the more trusted institutions, **confidence is fragile and deeply divided**. Racial and partisan polarization, as well as high-profile incidents of misconduct, have eroded trust, particularly among minorities and younger Americans. The recent rebound in 2024 suggests that trust can recover, but only with sustained efforts to address accountability and community relations.

RELIGION (Church/Organized Religion and Clergy)

Trust Trends Over Time

Public confidence in organized religion and clergy has **declined sharply since the 1970s**. In 1975, **68%** of Americans expressed “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the church. By 2022, this figure had fallen to a record low of 31%, before rebounding slightly to **36% in 2025**.

Table 4: Confidence in the Church/Organized Religion, 1975–2025

Year	% "Great Deal/Quite a Lot" Confidence
1975	68%
1985	67% (clergy honesty/ethics)
2001	64% (post-9/11 rebound)
2012	50% (last majority)
2018	<40% (first time)
2022	31% (record low)
2025	36% (modest rebound)

Sources: Gallup, Lifeway Research, Christian Index, Urban Missiology

Clergy honesty and ethics ratings have also plummeted, from 67% in 1985 to just 27% in 2025—the steepest decline among all professions tracked by Gallup.

Demographic and Partisan Patterns

- **Partisan Divide:**

In 2025, 64% of Republicans, 30% of independents, and just 21% of Democrats expressed confidence in the church—a 43-point gap.

- **Race:** White Americans (37%) are more trusting than Black (31%) and Hispanic (33%) Americans.
- **Age:** Older adults (55+) are most likely to trust the church (42%), but all age groups saw increases in 2025.
- **Gender and Income:** Men (37%) and women (36%) are now nearly equal in trust; higher income and education correlate with higher trust.

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Key Events and Scandals

- **Sexual Abuse Scandals (2002–present):** Widespread revelations of abuse and cover-ups, especially in the Catholic Church, led to steep declines in trust.
- **Post-9/11 (2001):** Temporary rebound in confidence.
- **Political Polarization:** Increasing alignment of religious institutions with partisan politics has driven away non-Republicans and younger Americans.

Analysis

The **decline in trust in religion** reflects both institutional failures (abuse scandals, perceived hypocrisy) and broader societal trends (secularization, political polarization). While the recent rebound in 2025 is notable, confidence remains far below historical levels, and the institution is now deeply divided along partisan and demographic lines.

EDUCATION (Public Schools and Higher Education)

Public Confidence in Public Schools

Confidence in public schools has **eroded steadily since the 1970s**. In 1979, 53% of Americans expressed “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in public schools. By 2019, this had fallen to 29%, and it remains at or near historic lows in 2025.

Table 5: Confidence in Public Schools, 1979–2025

Year	% "Great Deal/Quite a Lot" Confidence
1979	53%
1993	34%
2009	29%
2019	29%
2025	29%

Sources: Gallup, PDK Poll, Konyse

Satisfaction with K-12 education is also low: only 35% of Americans in 2025 expressed satisfaction with the quality of K-12 education, and just 2% rated schools as “excellent” for preparing students for careers.

Confidence in Higher Education

Trust in higher education has **declined even more sharply**. In 2010, 75% of Americans said a college degree was very important; by 2025, only 35% agreed—a historic low. Confidence in higher education is now closely divided: 36% have “a lot,” 32% “some,” and 32% “very little” confidence.

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Partisan and Demographic Divides:

- **Partisan Gap:** Democrats are 28% more likely than Republicans to trust public schools, and 19% more likely to trust higher education.
- **Age:** Young people are about 10% more likely to have confidence in higher education than older people.
- **Race and Income:** People of color and those with higher education/income are more supportive.

Key Events and Issues

- **Rising Tuition and Student Debt:** Concerns about affordability and value have eroded confidence.
- **Political Controversies:** Debates over curriculum, diversity, and free speech have polarized opinions, with Republicans increasingly skeptical of higher education’s direction.
- **COVID-19 Pandemic:** Disruptions to schooling and debates over remote learning, masking, and reopening further undermined trust.

Analysis

The **decline in trust in education** is driven by concerns about quality, cost, and politicization. While Americans continue to value education in principle, confidence in the system’s ability to deliver on its promises has waned, especially among conservatives and lower-income groups.

BIG BUSINESS

Trust and Confidence Trends

Public trust in big business has **declined significantly since the 1970s**. In 1979, 60% of Americans expressed “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in business. By 2019, this had fallen to 30%, and in 2025, only 15% expressed high confidence in big business—placing it near the bottom of all institutions.

Table 6: Confidence in Big Business, 1979–2025

Year	% "Great Deal/Quite a Lot" Confidence
1979	60%
1999	43%
2009	30%
2019	30%
2025	15%

Sources: Gallup, RAND, Daedalus

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Partisan and Demographic Patterns

- **Partisan Gap:** Republicans are 27% more likely than Democrats to trust business; this gap has widened over time.
- **Income:** Those in the highest income quintile have 15% more confidence in business than those in the lowest quintile.
- **Race and Age:** Differences exist but are less pronounced than for other institutions.

Key Events

- **Savings and Loan Crisis (1988–1992):** Damaged confidence in banks and business.
- **Enron and Corporate Scandals (early 2000s):** Eroded trust in corporate governance.
- **2008 Financial Crisis:** Triggered a sharp drop in confidence, from which business has not recovered.
- **COVID-19 Pandemic:** Exposed vulnerabilities and raised questions about corporate responsibility.

Analysis

Big business is now among the **least trusted American institutions**, reflecting concerns about *corporate power, inequality, and ethical lapses*. The partisan gap has grown, with Republicans remaining more supportive, but overall confidence is low and stagnant.

SMALL BUSINESS

Public Trust Trajectory

In stark contrast to big business, **small business is the most trusted institution in America**. Since Gallup began tracking it in 1998, trust in small business has ranged from 57% to 75%, consistently outpacing all other institutions. In 2025, **70%** of Americans expressed “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in small business.

Table 7: Confidence in Small Business, 1998–2025

Year	% "Great Deal/Quite a Lot" Confidence
1998	57%
2020	75% (pandemic peak)
2025	70%

Sources: Gallup, SBAM, Detroit Chamber, CalOSBA

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Demographic and Partisan Patterns

- **Bipartisan Support:** Trust in small business is high across all age groups and political parties: 68% among Democrats, 67% among independents, and 79% among Republicans.
- **Race and Education:** Trust drops by 10 points among non-white Americans and those without a college degree, reflecting barriers to entrepreneurship.

Analysis

Small business is seen as **local, community-oriented, and resilient**—qualities that resonate across the political spectrum. Even during crises (e.g., COVID-19), trust in small business increased, reflecting its symbolic role as the “backbone” of American society. This stands in sharp contrast to the skepticism directed at big business and other national institutions.

MEDIA (National and Local News, Journalists)

Trust in National and Local News

Trust in the media—especially national news organizations—has **declined precipitously since the 1970s**. In 1979, 51% of Americans expressed “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in newspapers, and 51% in television news. By 2019, these figures had dropped to 23% and 18%, respectively. In 2025, **56%** of Americans said they had “a lot” or “some” trust in national news organizations, down 20 points since 2016; trust in local news is higher (70%) but also declining.

Table 8: Confidence in Media, 1979–2025

Year	Newspapers	TV News	Local News	National News
1979	51%	51%	—	—
1999	33%	34%	—	—
2009	25%	23%	—	—
2019	23%	18%	—	—
2016	—	—	82%	76%
2025	—	—	70%	56%

Sources: Gallup, Pew, RAND, Springer

Partisan and Demographic Polarization

- **Partisan Gap:** Democrats are 46% more likely than Republicans to trust the press; in 2025, 69% of Democrats and 44% of Republicans expressed at least some trust in national news organizations.
- **Age:** Younger adults (under 30) are now as likely to trust social media (50%) as national news (51%); older adults are more trusting of traditional media.
- **Race and Education:** Black and Hispanic Americans report lower trust in national news; higher education correlates with higher trust in newspapers and TV news.

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Key Events and Trends

- **Watergate (1970s):** Initially boosted confidence in the press as a watchdog.
- **Rise of Cable News and Internet (1990s–2000s):** Fragmented the media landscape and fueled perceptions of bias.
- **Political Polarization:** Media increasingly seen as partisan, with Republicans distrusting mainstream outlets and Democrats more supportive.
- **Social Media and “Fake News”:** Proliferation of misinformation has further eroded trust, especially among conservatives.

Analysis

The **media crisis of trust** is characterized by deep partisan divides, generational shifts, and skepticism about accuracy and integrity. Local news remains more trusted than national outlets, but both have lost ground. The rise of news influencers and personalized news diets has further fragmented the information environment, contributing to polarization and confusion.

Cross-Institutional Polarization and Demographic Differences

Partisan Polarization

Across nearly all institutions, **partisan polarization in trust has intensified**. Republicans now trust the military, police, religion, and business far more than Democrats, while Democrats trust education, science, and the media more than Republicans. This polarization is a relatively recent phenomenon: in the 1970s, most institutions were trusted at similar levels across parties. By the 2010s and 2020s, the gap had widened dramatically, with trust in many institutions now serving as a marker of political identity.

Demographic Differences

- **Race:** Black and Hispanic Americans report lower trust in the police, government, and media; White Americans are more trusting of these institutions.
 - **Age:** Older adults are more trusting of the military, police, and religion; younger adults are more skeptical and more likely to trust social media.
 - **Education and Income:** Higher education and income correlate with greater trust in science, higher education, and the media, but not necessarily in government or business.
 - **Region:** Rural residents are more trusting of the police and small business; urban residents are more skeptical.
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Major Events Linked to Trust Shifts

Table 9: Major Events and Their Impact on Institutional Trust

Event/Period	Institutions Affected	Impact on Trust
Vietnam War (1960s–1975)	Government, Military	Sharp decline in trust
Watergate (1972–1974)	Government, Media	Collapse of trust, esp. in gov
Economic Stagflation (1970s)	Government, Business	Erosion of confidence
Gulf War (1991)	Military	Surge in confidence
9/11 Attacks (2001)	Government, Military, Church	Temporary rally in trust
Iraq/Afghanistan Wars	Military, Government	Gradual decline in trust
2008 Financial Crisis	Government, Business	Renewed skepticism
Ferguson/BLM (2014–2020)	Police, Government	Decline, esp. among minorities
COVID-19 Pandemic (2020–2022)	All institutions	Exposed divides, eroded trust
Jan 6, 2021, Capitol Attack	Government, Media, Police	Deepened polarization

Sources: Pew, Gallup, Daedalus, RAND, academic reviews

Consequences of Declining Trust

Political Polarization and Civic Behavior

Declining trust in institutions is **strongly associated with increased political polarization, alienation, and diminished civic engagement**. As Americans lose faith in government, media, and other institutions, they are more likely to:

- **View opposing parties and their supporters with suspicion or hostility.**
- **Withdraw from civic life**, including voting, volunteering, and community engagement.
- **Seek out information sources that confirm their existing beliefs**, reinforcing echo chambers and ideological silos.
- **Question the legitimacy of elections and government actions**, as seen in the aftermath of the 2020 election and January 6, 2021.

Social Trust and Cohesion

Social trust—the belief that “most people can be trusted”—has also declined, from 46% in 1972 to 34% in 2024. This erosion of interpersonal trust is correlated with declining confidence in institutions and contributes to social fragmentation, isolation, and reduced willingness to cooperate for the common good.

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Media Consumption and Information Disorder

As trust in traditional media declines, Americans increasingly turn to **social media, influencers, and partisan outlets** for news. This shift has:

- **Increased exposure to misinformation and disinformation.**
- **Amplified polarization and confusion**, as people encounter divergent “facts” and narratives.
- **Undermined the ability of society to reach consensus on basic issues**, complicating responses to crises such as pandemics or elections.

Institutional Performance and Legitimacy

Low trust makes it **harder for institutions to function effectively**. Governments struggle to implement policies, police face resistance in communities, and schools and universities are caught in political crossfire. The legitimacy of institutions is called into question, threatening the stability of democratic governance.

Synthesis: Overall Trends and Societal Impact

Summary Table: Confidence in Key American Institutions, 1970s vs. 2020s

Institution	1970s Confidence	2020s Confidence	Change	Current Rank (2025)
Federal Government	60–70%	17–33%	↓↓↓	Very Low
Military	50–60%	61–62%	↑	High
Police	60–65%	45–51%	↓	Moderate
Religion/Church	65–68%	31–36%	↓↓	Moderate-Low
Public Schools	53%	29%	↓↓	Low
Higher Education	70–75%	35–42%	↓↓	Moderate
Big Business	60%	15–30%	↓↓	Very Low
Small Business	—	68–75%	—	Highest
National Media	50–51%	18–23%	↓↓	Very Low
Local Media	—	70%	—	Moderate

Sources: Gallup, Pew, RAND, Daedalus, academic reviews

Key Takeaways

- **Trust in most major American institutions has declined sharply since the 1970s**, with the steepest drops in government, media, religion, education, and big business.
- **The military and small business are notable exceptions**, maintaining or increasing high levels of public confidence.

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- **Partisan polarization in trust has intensified**, with Democrats and Republicans now holding diametrically opposed views on many institutions.
- **Demographic divides—by race, age, education, and region—have widened**, especially for the police, education, and media.
- **Major historical events**—wars, scandals, economic crises, and social movements—have triggered both temporary surges and lasting declines in trust.
- **Declining trust has contributed to political polarization, reduced civic engagement, fragmented media consumption, and weakened social cohesion.**
- **Restoring trust will require institutional reforms, transparency, accountability, and efforts to bridge partisan and demographic divides.**



Conclusion: The Societal Impact of Declining Trust

The **crisis of institutional trust** in America is both a reflection and a driver of the nation's political, cultural, and social challenges. As confidence in government, media, education, and other pillars of society has eroded, Americans have become more polarized, less engaged, and more skeptical of one another.

The consequences are profound: diminished capacity to solve collective problems, increased vulnerability to misinformation, and a fraying of the social fabric that underpins democracy.

Yet, the persistence of high trust in small business and the military suggests that Americans still value institutions perceived as competent, community-oriented, and apolitical. Rebuilding trust in other institutions will require not only improved performance and accountability but also a renewed commitment to shared values and national purpose.

In sum, the story of institutional trust in America over the past 50 years is one of decline, division, and disruption—but also of resilience and the possibility of renewal. The challenge for the coming decades is to restore confidence in the institutions that bind Americans together, ensuring that democracy, civic life, and social cohesion can endure and thrive.

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Methodology and Data Sources

The analysis in this report synthesizes longitudinal survey data and scholarly research from multiple sources:

- **Gallup Confidence in Institutions Survey (1973–2025):** Annual measures of Americans’ confidence in a range of institutions, including the federal government, military, police, church, education, business, and media.
- **Pew Research Center:** Repeated cross-sectional surveys on trust in government, media, education, and religion, with demographic and partisan breakdowns.
- **General Social Survey (GSS):** Biennial data on confidence in institutions and social trust, with detailed demographic variables.
- **Academic Reviews and Meta-Analyses:** Syntheses of institutional trust trends and polarization.
- **Specialized Polls:** PDK Poll on public schools, Lifeway Research on religion, and others.

Where possible, data are presented as time series to illustrate long-term trends. The report also integrates findings from qualitative studies and event-based analyses to contextualize shifts in trust.
